

Modern U.S. Varieties:

Not all printers of U.S. stamps work for the USPS

by Rudy de Mordaigle

Who would have thought? Modern U.S. postage stamps and Viagra are in the same boat. Now you know why your stamp collection is exciting. Actually, that boat turns out to be North Korean, from a country whose economy could use some stimulation. In that line, North Korea has been printing bogus U.S. currency, and, as though passing *supernote* \$100 bills wasn't enough, they've tried their hand at U.S. postage stamps. Here's a small slice of the story, from an op ed piece by Peter Brookes that first appeared in the *New York Post* and then in the *Boston Herald* in 2006.

Last summer, a U.S.-Canada sting indicted 87 Americans and foreigners in 11 U.S. cities for smuggling North Korean contraband.

Authorities seized: \$4 million in supernotes; 1 billion sham cigs (some Chinese) worth \$42 million; ecstasy, meth and Viagra worth hundreds of thousands of dollars; \$700,000 in mock U.S. postage stamps and several hundred thousand dollars in jeans.

It must have been gratifying to the U.S. Postal Service that the stamps were valued in the hundreds of thousands and not in the millions. Here's part of another story, this time from *The New York Times* and datelined Philadelphia, October 9.

Interest in the...stamp counterfeiting conspiracy unearthed about six months ago by the United States Secret Service, and which resulted in the arrest of eight men, one a Government employee and two formerly in the service of the United States, was revived today when the defendants were placed on trial before Judge McPherson, in the United States District Court...

Jacobs, Kendig, and Burns were arrested April 19 last. They were charged with the making of an immense quantity of internal revenue stamps, which they used

on their cigar boxes, and counterfeit "Monroe head" hundred-dollar silver certificates, the engraving on which was so perfect as to cause the Treasury Department to call in the entire issue of the note.

Cigar boxes? Monroe heads? That dateline was, as you suspected, 1899. The counterfeiting of U.S. stamps is nothing new, postage or revenue, and thanks to the current Postal Service policy of "cheap is best," they can be made in almost anyone's apartment or garage, using offset lithography. From an ABC News story in February 2007:

Authorities say they have shut down an underground printing operation in New York City that was producing thousands of high-quality counterfeit U.S. postage stamps... The busted operation was being run out of an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Not exactly a garage, but the apartment print shop was producing excellent quality coils and sheets of the 39¢ Liberty Flag stamps using three industrial printers and was getting ready to expand production. The stamps were being sold at a discount to small grocery stores and on the Internet. I'm not sure if the fake shown in Figure 1 is one of those, since I wouldn't call it "high quality."

Multiple forgeries of the 44¢ Flag

The Postal Service issued six different 44¢ Flag stamps in 2009, and the underground printers exceeded that, since I've found eight different counterfeit printings that mimic Scott 4393 and another that mimics 4394. All I've seen look like coils. These are a fun and complex bunch.

A USPS spokesman told John Crudele of the *New York Post* that the fakes were everywhere. I'd agree with that. Discounted rolls were offered on eBay, advertised as coils of 100 in strips of 20. You got five strips with selvage at each end as shown in Figure 2. You

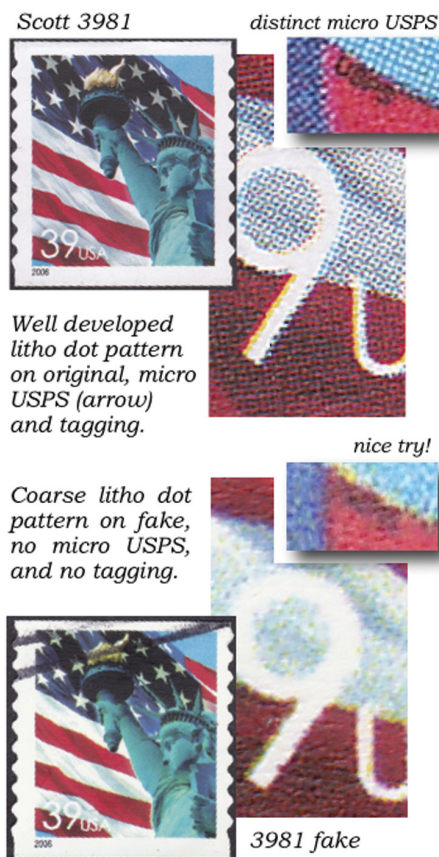


Figure 1. Scott 3981 and counterfeit, below. You can either pull out your shortwave u/v lamp or your magnifier to find the fakes. The lamp is faster.



Figure 2. Counterfeits of Scott 4393 were being sold in 100-stamp coils on the streets of Queens for \$34 two years ago. They weren't real coils, since they consisted of five strips of 20 stamps. Strips had selvage at either end.

could get them in New York at corner markets, usually at a markup, which is a twist, and on the streets where a coil went for \$34 instead of the \$44 face value.

Flag counterfeits also appeared in San Francisco on Craigslist, where an ad said the person offering them had bought more stamps than they could use, so these were being sold for 25¢ each. The San Francisco stamps were formatted as convertible booklets. Of those, I have not seen an example, so maybe the Postal Service exercised greater vigilance there and kicked all the fakes back to the senders, unlike the Kilmer, New Jersey mail processing plant, which merrily cancelled counterfeit coils and sent the letters on their way. Or didn't even bother with a cancel and still sent the letters on for delivery.

Perth Amboy, New Jersey is separated from Staten Island, New York only by a tidal strait called the Arthur Kill. Its proximity to "The City" might tell us that it was easy to buy the counterfeit postage across the state line. Maybe the fakes were being sold locally. I've seen examples of four different counterfeit printings of Scott 4393 on bill payment envelopes, all with Perth Amboy return addresses, three of which were postmarked at Kilmer. Figure 3 shows one of these postmarks, digitally cropped from the envelope. The fourth stamp wasn't canceled, but still carried the bill payment the full distance. Considering the Postal Service's complaints about diminishing income, do you see waste here?



Figure 3. Does the USPS really care about counterfeit stamp use? Some processing centers don't seem to make an effort. This stamp is a fake, but the bill payment sailed right through and was delivered.

None of the counterfeit 44¢ Flag stamps have what I would call normal tagging, where you see a yellow green glow under shortwave ultraviolet. You do get a purple response, but you can see the same response in the paper of many envelopes, including the Perth Amboy bill payment group. On those envelopes the stamps seem dead, but when one is placed on paper that is

unreactive to shortwave, the stamp exhibits a purple glow only slightly less intense than that of the normal yellow green tagging. Whether these trigger the cancellers or whether the postal workers just send kickouts through again on override to get cancels is a good question.

So, how to find them? My first choice would be to mine mixtures with a shortwave u/v lamp. For those who prefer the magnifier, I'll give you the identifying characteristics of all of the 44¢ Flag counterfeits I've seen, and lots of illustrations. Eventually we'll have space for a key, just not this month.

Counterfeit of Scott 4394

Scott 4394 was printed by Avery Dennison and issued in coils of 100 stamps. The paper had a matte finish. The fake is printed on glossy paper, so they are relatively easy to spot. The shine is particularly easy to see in the margins. The purple star field of these stamps varies under white fluorescent lamps, with the counterfeit less purple.

On the original, the lettering of "44USA" is cleanly outlined in black. On the fake, the outlines are rough. In the white stripes, the original has a well-developed diamond pattern of litho dots. The dots pattern is weak in the counterfeit.

The wavy diecuts of Scott 4394 have ties, tiny paper bridges that cross the diecutting. The pattern varies with individual stamps, but a careful look always reveals at least one tie on each side. The diecutting of the counterfeits is very close to that of the original, but totally without ties. See Figure 4 for a comparison of the original and counterfeit.

Many counterfeits of Scott 4393

The counterfeiters went crazy with copies of the Ashton Potter version of the 44¢ Flag coil. I suspect it might have something to do with the ease of obtaining diecutting mats that matched Ashton Potter's diecutting pattern, but this is only a guess. As far as printing, it varies quite a bit, and I have seen eight different versions so far. I'll arbitrarily label them counterfeit A, counterfeit B and so on, and point

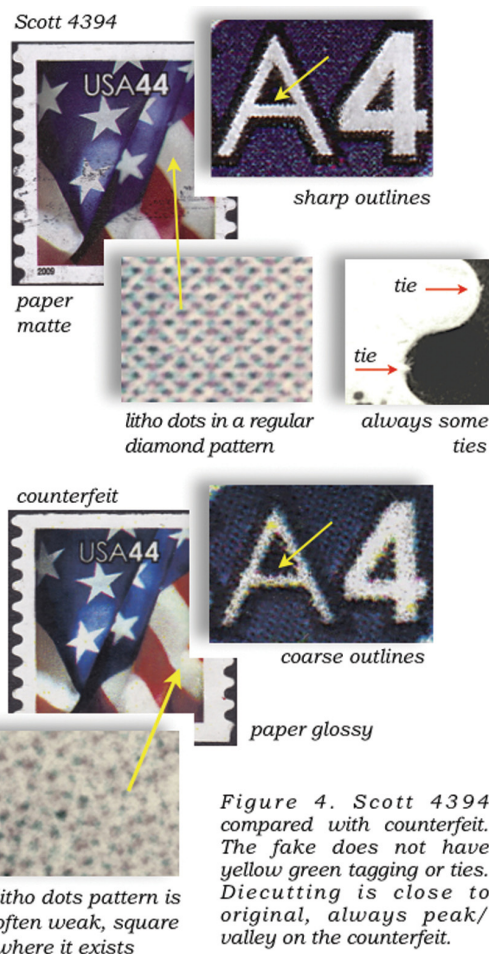


Figure 4. Scott 4394 compared with counterfeit. The fake does not have yellow green tagging or ties. Diecutting is close to original, always peak/valley on the counterfeit.

out the identifying features. I won't be surprised if you find something else. If you do, I'd like to know about it.

The original Scott 4393 has an image that's 18.5 mm wide. Six of the counterfeits have narrower images, so they are easy to pick out. The shade of the star field on the flag also varies. On the original it's a purplish blue. The counterfeits can be lighter or darker, or less purple, so if you spot a stamp where the color is off, check for tagging. If you don't have a shortwave u/v lamp, then measure the image width. None of the counterfeits have yellow green tagging, though all exhibit a fairly bright purple glow under both shortwave and longwave ultraviolet. Only two of these counterfeits have a microprinted "USPS", and they are the only two that aren't printed on glossy paper. You know what to look for in general. Now, for the details.

Counterfeit A and family

Three counterfeits have an image 17.7 mm wide. Counterfeit A has a margin date that's printed in black over cyan. Counterfeits Ab and Ac have the date printed in black only, with

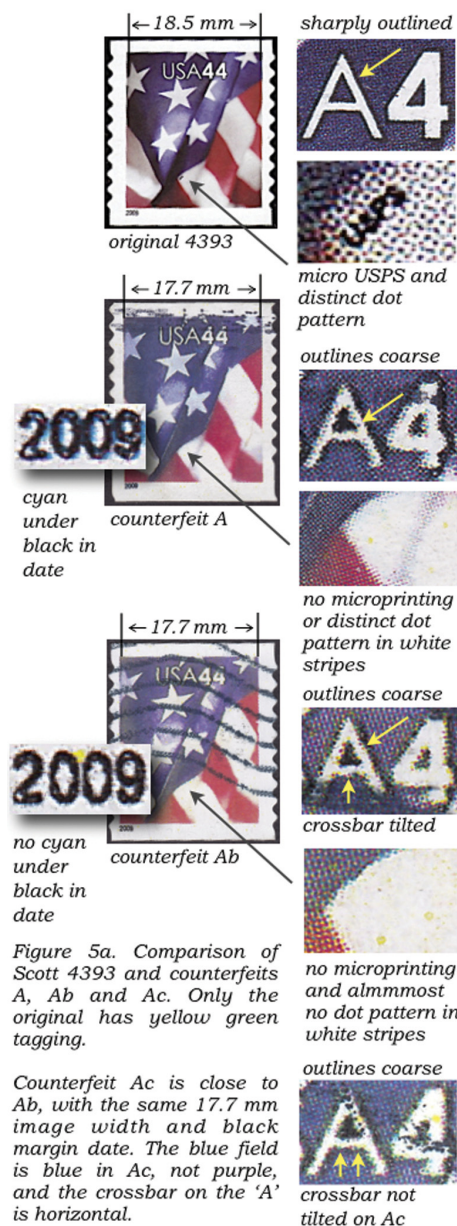


Figure 5a. Comparison of Scott 4393 and counterfeits A, Ab and Ac. Only the original has yellow green tagging.

Counterfeit Ac is close to Ab, with the same 17.7 mm image width and black margin date. The blue field is blue in Ac, not purple, and the crossbar on the 'A' is horizontal.

no underlying cyan. You have to look carefully to see this.

Counterfeit Ab has the crossbar of the "A" tilted up to the right. In Counterfeit Ac, the crossbar is horizontal. The shape of the "9" in "2009" differs, with the tail extending to the edge of the digit in A, but not in Ab or Ac.

In both A and Ab, the color of the star field is a purplish blue. In Ac, the field is blue, without the purple cast, though this might vary. I have seen two examples of counterfeit A, but only one each of Ab and Ac. See Figure 5 for a comparison. All of these are on glossy paper, particularly noticeable in the white margins.

Solo example of Counterfeit B

So far, I've seen only one fake of

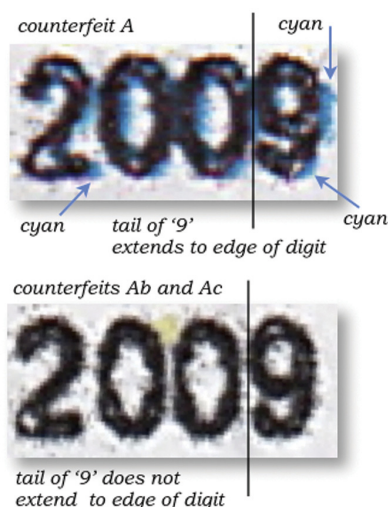


Figure 5b. Comparison of dates on counterfeits A (top), Ab and Ac. There is cyan under the black in counterfeit A, but not in Ab or Ac. The shape of the "9" in Ab and Ac differs from A.

the APU coil stamp that has an image width of 17.1 mm, and that counterfeit is on one of the Perth Amboy covers. It should be easy to pick out by image width, by its glossy paper, and by the margin date that is black with no underlying cyan. The shape of the "9" is the same short tail version as in counterfeits Ab and Ac. As with Ab and Ac, there are almost no litho dots in the white stripes, and there is no microprinted "USPS". Because the image width is so different, I'm arbitrarily calling this counterfeit B, Figure 6. I have seen only one example, on an envelope that received no cancel but was delivered anyway. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Counterfeit C, another solo example, has dotted date

Counterfeit C, Figure 7, also sailed through processing at Kilmer, N.J. on a bill payment envelope and was delivered. Its image is 17.3 mm wide, there's no microprinted "USPS", the paper is shiny again, but unlike the other counterfeits that lack microprinting, the white stripes all have areas of distinct shading dots.

An identifying characteristic of counterfeit C is the margin date, which is composed of poorly aligned dots of black, cyan, yellow and magenta. Oddly, the yellow is difficult to see under the microscope, but the scanner picks it up readily. Without a magnifier, the date doesn't look as dark as the ones that are black or black over cyan, no surprise. Beware of any 44¢ Flags that

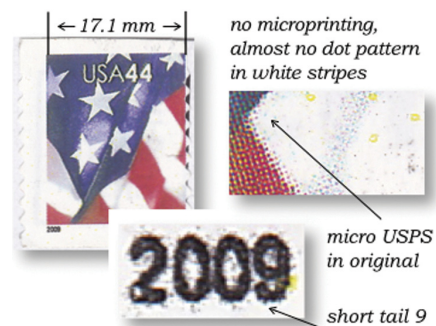


Figure 6. Counterfeit B, has a narrow image, no microprinting, and a margin date with no cyan under the black. The shape of the "9" matches that of counterfeits Ab and Ac. Those both have an image 17.7 mm wide. This stamp is on a cover mailed at Perth Amboy, NJ and delivered without a postmark.

have faint dates and washed out color. I have only seen one example like this one. Where are the others?

Counterfeit D – more dots

Counterfeit D is another with a date composed of dots. All five of the examples I've seen of this one have an odd shape, with top or bottom margins distinctly wide and side margins distinctly narrow as shown in Figure 8. Actually, it doesn't seem that proportions mattered to whoever cooked these up, since they are all taller than the original and not as wide. The image is 18.0 mm wide, not the 18.5 of the original, but it's the outer dimensions that make this stamp look funny. The color is not far from the original, so you might not pick it out of a pile at first glance, except for the goofy margins and its glossy paper.

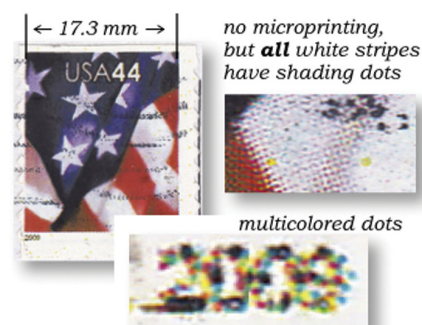


Figure 7. Counterfeit C has a date that's composed of dots of black, cyan, magenta and yellow. Oddly, the yellow is much more visible to the scanner than to the naked eye, but it's definitely there. The white stripes all have areas of distinct shading dots, unlike counterfeits A, Ab, Ac and B. It's the only one I've seen with an image 17.3 mm wide. This stamp is on a bill payment envelope postmarked Kilmer, NJ.

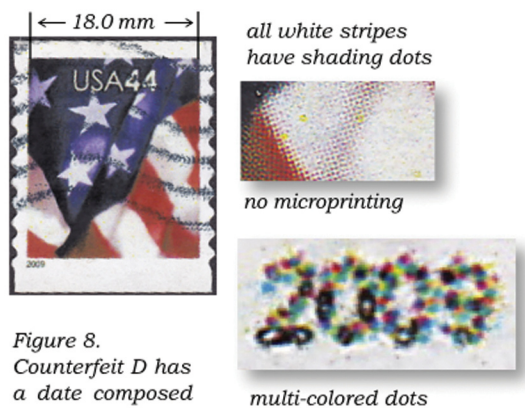


Figure 8. Counterfeit D has a date composed of dots of cyan, yellow, magenta and black, and as with counterfeit C, but the proportions of this stamp are odd, making it look tall and thin.

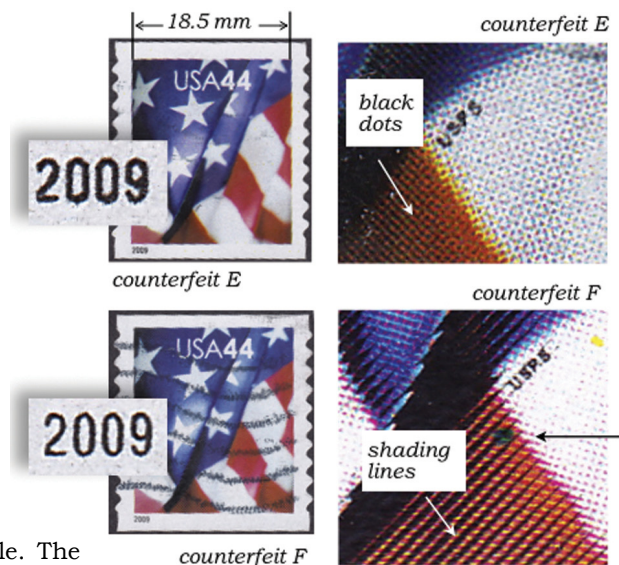


Figure 9. Counterfeits E and F both have an image the same width as the original. Image width, presence of a microprinted USPS, and a sharp black date will help you identify these. The black shading separates them. On E it's composed of dots. On F, it's dramatic black lines. Both have odd diecutting, with some peaks asymmetric.

The black dot (arrow) occurred on every other stamp in a strip of 20 of counterfeit F. Keep your eye out for this variety.

The diecutting looks good, but a second look shows that its gauge is not consistent from top to bottom. Overall, the diecuts gauge 9.5, where the original is 9.4. You can spot the difference in off paper examples when you do edge-to-edge comparisons of the diecuts by pushing the stamps together on your desktop. Take a second look when any don't mesh perfectly. The shape of the peaks and valleys is close to the original, even if their spacing is a bit off.

Best of the bunch, counterfeits E and F

Whoever did the printing of counterfeits E and F gets at least a 'B.' The image is the same width as the original, the paper is matte, there's a microprinted "USPS" in the right place, and the date is sharp and black. It's a surprise, then, that no attempt was made to outline the "USA 44," but neither of these have outlining. Maybe the idea was that it was better to have no outlining than to do a crummy job, or maybe they just thought it wasn't important. At any rate, if you find a *microprinted* 44¢ Flag that isn't normally tagged, it's likely to be one of these.

These two stamps are easily sorted from a pile of fakes by the width of the image and the presence of microprinting. They are separated from each other by the black shading on the flag. In E it's the standard black dots. In F it's dramatic black lines. See Figure 9.

I don't know the format for counterfeit E, but I suspect it was coils of 100 in strips of 20, as with counterfeit F. I have seen four of these counterfeit F strips, one used stamp on cover

and another used single. The printers didn't use a web press, instead printing on sheets and then separating strips with selvage at each end. On one of these strips, every other stamp has a black dot in the red stripe just below the "U" in the micro "USPS." It can't be a constant plate variety, printed on one stamp each revolution of the cylinder, so it must be a flaw in the artwork. To me, that's more interesting, since it represents a printing variety of counterfeit F. I'll not label it, but if you find one, you can.

Apartment house print shops are likely to slip up somewhere. In this case, it was the diecutting, which gets a 'D' at best, since some of the peaks aren't close to symmetrical. Think of a breaking wave, and that's what you'll see in Figure 9.

If this hasn't been enough flyspecking for one month, there will be more of this later this year. These goofy stamps will be a challenge to find, since the numbers of counterfeits printed can't be close to the numbers of the real thing printed for the Postal Service. Finding *any* counterfeit is a kick. You'll greatly increase the odds if you scan mixtures with a shortwave u/v lamp. If you don't have one, want to buy one at a reasonable price, and if you missed the column where I gave you some sources for decent and inexpensive lamps, I'd be happy to send a copy. My address follows the column.

If you're wondering, it's not illegal to have these in your collection. Just don't print up your own, or buy some



Feel sand between your toes? These breaking waves don't match Ashton Potter's symmetrical diecutting. I turned them 90° - that's the beach on the left. It's still winter, so no sunbathers, sorry. You'll find these on both E and F.

on eBay and then use them, not that you would do either. Free food and laundry in a federal prison can't be that great. And if you do find some on eBay, advertised as discount postage, don't be surprised if a postal inspector gives you a call. I know of one instance where some fakes were impounded to be used as evidence in a trial, but otherwise, the postal sleuths have just asked questions and let the collectors keep their finds.

Questions and comments are invited. Write to me at Rudy de Mordaigle, PO Box 184, Olancho, CA 93549, or c/o USSN, 42 Sentry Way, Merrimack, NH 03054, email jd@stampnewsnow.com. I'll answer any questions and include any new information in the column.